ANNA HELD AND F. ZIEGFELD JR IN "PAPA'S WIFE"

MAY IRWIN IN "SISTER MARY"

IRVING ADDS TO THE TORRENT OF HORROR PLAYS.

By Alan Dale.

LET me suggest, in a mild, hesitant and utterly deferential manner that the "popular" French Revolution, as a stage topic, be placed upon a shelf and kept there for a decade or two. As an excuse for the horrible it is probably the best thing going, but it has begun to pall upon us. "Robespierre" has capped the climax. Big prices were paid for a veritable shower-bath of horrors. We all admired the Irving production, and paid our little tributes to the famous actor redivivus, but now that it is all over, and we breathe again, I can't help suggesting—mildly, hesitantly and utterly deferentially—that the French Revolution be dropped.

Theatre-goers have had three saturated solutions of those prison scenes leading to the guillotine. The spectacular anguish and mortal distress of the guillotine candidates were the climatic feature of that wretched affair by Charles Coghlan called "Citizen Pierre" at the Fifth Avenue Theatre. We were asked to wait until midnight to witness the dislocation of families and the final sensations of the doomed. A few weeks ago we got "The Only Way," the final scene of which was the passage of suffering Frenchmen through that grewsome door leading to the executioner. Again we filed out of the theatre with misery in our hearts, and in our eyes the picture of Miller, all calcium light, making handsome utterances before he confided his head to the basket.

In "Robespierre" the Fort Libre prison scene is even ghastlier than the episodes in "Citizen Pierre" and "The Only Way." It comes early in the evening, however, and you know that it is not the alpha and omega of the play. But Sardou has positively strained after the lugubrious. Such physical agony as that depicted upon the stage of the Knickerbocker can scarcely be set down as art. (No, gentle readers, I am not going to discuss art.) The sight of a mother torn from her child, the sound of the child's wailing, and the utterance by the wretched mother of the words "be good," as she passes to the guillotine, harrow your feelings, for no particular object that I can discover. Each of the prisoners, as he leaves the courtyard, has some forlorn and anguished speech to make, and when you come to consider that this is an "evening's entertainment," you can't help asking yourself why.

If it had been whispered a hundred years ago to one of these victims that the time would come when their sufferings would be offered up to a collection of ladies and gentlemen bent on pleasure for mere entertainment, they would possibly have imagined that succeeding generations were destined to be barbarians. Perhaps, if Robespierre had known it, he would have used this bit of information as an additional torture. He would have said to the desperate mother, as she passed through the dreaded portal, "At the end of the next century theatre mobs will applaud that spectacular exit of yours."

We have had enough of the French Revolution. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals could now plausibly interfere and prevent these ruthless exhibitions of the very quintessence of mortal distress. Sardou believes in the dramatic effect of torture. In his play "La Tosca," which is not French-Revolutionary, there is an episode where La Tosca listens to the groans of her lover on the rack, and sees him afterward as he emerges from the torture chamber haggard and bloody. That scene always made me feel that I was in a dissecting room, and sent cold chills down my spine.

The guillotine incidents in these "Terror" plays are equally distressing, and now that we have seen the most magnificent production of the sort that the stage has offered, I say: Let us cry halt. We are willing to sympathize with the legitimate emotions—we adore a stage heartache or two, and we revel in footlight hysterics and theatrical fits—but we do not care for the sheer and undiluted agony that precedes a violent death. Probably, if Sardou had his own way, he would go a step further and show us the headless bodies of the "Terror" victims. As long as this French playwright—the canniest of this craft—can produce a squirm, he does not mind very much how he does it. The Knickerbocker audience certainly squirmed Monday night, but as the Fort Libre scene came early in the play, and less poignant misery followed it, its effect was somewhat counteracted, and critics could scarcely spare the time to dwell particularly on this one phase.

Irving's productions are always "handled" so masterfully that the saving "slip" that occasionally converts agony into humor can scarcely be hoped for. When Mrs. Potter and Kyrle Bellew produced "Charlotte Corday" some years ago, a dark green scene of terror was converted into a moment of mirth by the unforeseen occurrence. Marat was in his bath, and Charlotte approached silently and unceremoniously from the back to do him to death. She had no sooner stabbed him than the bath tub fell over, and there you saw Marat with all his clothes on, sitting there dry, cozy and unhurt. It spoiled the scene, but I don't think that very many people objected to the little interruption.

I could have welcomed just such an incident in "Robespierre's" Fort Libre picture, but it was not forthcoming. The Irving producers are too careful. They err on the other side, and they accentuate rather than underestimate the blackness of the Sardou idea.

These tear-washed adieux were the only features in "Robespierre" to which anybody could possibly object. But this is a light and a frothy public, and I am surprised that we have endured the French Revolution as a stage topic for so long. It belongs to the French. Let the French keep it. Let it be dished up to them as a lesson, a menace—as one of their just perquisites. Why should it cross the Atlantic Ocean and be perpetually hurled at the heads of our meek and innocent citizens, who have nothing to learn from it, and little sympathy to waste upon it? It is a better topic for school than for theatre.

My old friend "Student of the Drama" (who writes to me very often) will probably tell me that I am all wrong, and that this graphic page of history is one of the finest themes that dramatists will ever get. I know quite well all that he can possibly say—so well, in fact, that I could say it myself. But I persist in believing that we have had all we want of the French Revolution for a decade or two. The best proof of this lies in Sardou's "Robespierre," which I assert would have failed had it not been for Irving and his colossal production. Think of a "barnstormer" attempting that ghost scene in the Conciergerie, with mouthings, rantings, a few "super" ghosts, and a cheap scene! Think of the last act in the hall of the National Convention, without the mob and the well-trained howls and roars. All of this gave Irving a great chance, and in all of it he succeeded as he has rarely succeeded before. Managers, as producers, are very much like sheep, following the leader, and it is this awful fear that they may still rush French-Revolution-wards that prompts me to cry "enough," and to hope that we can leave this period to the library shelves for some years to come. After all, American audiences can have their own little troubles to fall back upon when they are in need of a little distress. The "civil war" is not played out yet, vide Mr. Clyde Fitch's "Barbara Frietchie" at the Criterion. At that playhouse you are tenderly harrowed. You weep tears that come gently. There is no sword of Damocles hangling over your head. Even the stage manager is comparatively insignificant. Mr. Fitch opens the floodgates of your heart, and Miss Julia Marlowe does the rest.

These are merely the afterthoughts of "Robespierre." I have sat through this matchless production twice. It is a splendid thing to study. It is something that you will never forget. My point is merely this: Let us shut up our French history books and turn to pleasanter and newer topics. It is a curious thing to note that our three recent French Revolution plays have been produced by star-actors. Charles Coghlan "presented" his "Citizen Pierre," Martin Harvey offered "The Only Way" (which Henry Miller duplicates) and Irving confides to you Sardou's "Robespierre."

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Vale Zangwill!

I MUST confess that I admire the fighter who sticks to his guns. Discretion may be the better part of valor—great authorities say that it is—but it doesn't look so pretty or "glint" so fairly in the sunlight. The valor of which we heard so much in connection with "the Zangwill play" has given place to discretion. Although this priceless work of art was to stay at the Herald Square Theatre for the season, we are now told that it is off to London. Of course, it is an unprecedented success, and all that sort of thing; equally of course, the public has set the verdict of the critics at defiance. But it goes away just the same. The splendid, satisfying, artistic and logical reason is that the Herald Square Theatre is handicapped by lack of a gallery.

I never knew until I heard this statement how absolutely necessary a gallery is for Zangwill to "play to." I had my suspicions on the subject when I heard this gifted young Zionist lecture on the drama at the Lyceum Theatre. He seemed to be a splendid subject for gallery aspirations. But the statement from the Herald Square that "we are somewhat handicapped by the lack of a gallery" must be accepted as conclusive. I should say that "The Children of the Ghetto" would have a fair chance in a theatre that held nothing but gallery. Such playhouses are rare, of course. Possibly some Zangwill believer will be inspired to erect one. Even that wholesale constructor of theatres Oscar Hammerstein has not, as yet, been fired by any such scheme. Possibly it is of the future.

The "harsh treatment" (I love that expression "harsh treatment;" it sounds so workhousey) accorded to Zangwill's brother-egotist's drama, "The Christian," in London, would, I should imagine, awake fear in the discretionary-valorous breasts of the Liebler company. "The Christian" was stupid and blatant enough, goodness knows, but it is a gem of interest compared with "The Children of the Ghetto." Once bitten, twice shy. New York fell into the cunning trap laid for it by the inimitable Hall Caine, and stood seriously aside to watch the ministerial troops marching to the playhouse. New York failed to fall into the Zangwill net. In London "The Christian" was presented without any palaver, and it was roasted to cinders, in spite of the "big business" that I did on this side of the water.

I can't believe that even "the spirit of cussedness" will induce London to look favorably upon "the Zangwill play." The one "religious play" that succeeded in London was "The Sign of the Cross," and I presume that its success was due to the fact that it wasn't religious, but extremely of the flesh, fleshly. At any rate "the Zangwill play" will be something new on the other side. English people have not been dosed with rude caricature. They have not allowed their music halls to serve them up coarse pictures of odious Jewish types. They have had no "Hebrew cake-walk" at their Empire or Alhambra, as we have had at our Koster & Bial's. So they may possibly accept Pinchas as a joke—although I doubt it very much.

Let me take this opportunity of thanking the noble people who have flooded me with Jewish tracts since the production of "The Children of the Ghetto." Let me beg them, however, to send no more, as life is too short to digest so much literature, and I can get along very nicely without it—thanks for kind inquiries. Some "well-wisher" even sent me a Jewish song—I think it was called "The Rabbi's Daughter," for which I earnestly thank him. He wanted me to review it, but I regret that I am unable to do this. Couldn't he get it inserted, as a specialty, into "the Zangwill play," and let it go at that?

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Concerning Ventilation

THE latest thing in theatrical "ventilation" seems to be an effort to give you a needle bath of cold air as you sit helplessly wedged in your seat, freighted with your clothes and elbowing the be-feathered hat of your neighbor. This little attention is undoubtedly meant very well, but it is very unpleasant, to say nothing of its danger. At the Knickerbocker Theatre the other night I had one wintry and one summery side. I was comfortably warm on the right and disastrously numb with cold on the left. There was a sort of volcano of chilly air spouting from a "register" in the aisle. It blew a gale. The ladies who passed over it on the way to their seats looked as though they were dancing a serpentine dance. If you held your programme over it, it was as though you had exposed the sheet to a temporary cyclone. In addition to this simulation of what the weather prophet calls "inclement weather," there were dear little gusts of air blowing from beneath your seat under your heels. Altogether, you were not quite sure what was happening. You were baked on one side and chilled on the other.

A lady by my side begged me to run out and get it stopped. This I did, and an obliging young man did the deed. Immediately after this an electric fan began to whizz somewhere—I don't know where—and then I gave up all attempts at further comfort. I merely felt like the "poor robin" when the March winds do blow, and I was obliged to remark to my adjacent lady, "You must put your head under your wing, poor thing."

The motto of managers may be: "The audience does the roasting, so we'll do the chilling;" but, seriously, this new idea of ventilation is discouraging. Women dress lightly at the playhouses, and it would be a pity if they were obliged to go to theatres in Winter wraps. A wind from below is not calculated to inspire an audience with feelings of gratitude, and I suggest that it would be better to let us bake rather than to freeze us. Rheumatism and its little accessories are delights that need no wooing. ALAN DALE.

SIR HENRY IRVING IN "ROBESPIERRE"

MISS ELLEN TERRY IN "ROBESPIERRE"

OLGA NETHERSOLE AS "SAPHO"

MAUD WINTER

ETHEL CAPRICE WINLET CHILD ACTRESS

MISS GEORGIE MENDUM

MISS MAUD CHASE

JESSIE MILLWARD